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Part 1

Higher Education Reforms in Japan

National Universities before and after Incorporation

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1. Introduction

Incorporation or “Hojin-ka” of national universities is one of the most important events that feature recent university reform in Japan. The aim of incorporation is, according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter “MEXT”), to make national universities be more autonomous institutions by separating them from the main body of the government. The MEXT says that, by the incorporation, national universities are expected to be more attractive and unique institutions and to perform the most advanced research and teaching. That means national universities should be more responsive to the various needs of people and society.

The incorporation, however, is not only for university reform but also for administrative and financial reform of the Japanese government itself. This means that universities are expected to perform better research and teaching, while they should spend less money and staff. Thus the situation is quite complicated and the solution is not unique.

Universities and colleges in Japan have recently experienced a great change in their management and administration due to the impact of knowledge-based society. In the last century, when Japan was in the mode of industrial society, people regarded the university system as a device of finding diligent youth, by its strict entrance exam, who might work hard for the industry after graduation rather than a place of teaching and learning.

Thus people did not demand so much for university teaching itself. University management was a steady business because they could easily recruit new students every year without tough effort for improving their teaching. In the recent years, however, people’s demand for university teaching and research become much harder. The more university management becomes complicated, the more it should be improved and sophisticated. In that sense, the role of managers and administrators become greater. The growing expectation for the role of non-academic staff, thus, is recently discussed much more often than before as “the new professional for the better management of universities and colleges.”

2. The Role of National Universities in the 20th Century

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The first modern university in Japan was created by the government in 1877 as the national university. University of Tokyo, it was called so, was composed of several colleges and soon reorganized as the Imperial University in 1886. The mission of the Imperial University was to introduce the most advanced research from developed countries and to nourish talented students to be the elite for the state. It was set up as the highest ranked higher education institute because it was the only university in Japan. It was composed of 5 colleges and graduate schools; law, medicine, engineering, literature and science.

Later, the state created six more Imperial Universities, in Kyoto, Sendai, Fukuoka and so on. These institutions have led higher education system in Japan. Thus national universities tend to be regarded as the prestigious higher education institutions even today. Besides Imperial Universities, the state established other kinds of higher education institutions such as technical colleges, commercial colleges, medical colleges, normal schools, and so on.

Universities had not been allowed to establish by the local government and private sector until the reform in 1918. After that, the number of universities increased in number to be 46 in the 1940s. However, national universities continued to take initiative for advancing research as well as for nourishing talents.

After the War II, the higher education system in Japan was completely renewed. The most specific feature of the renewal was that all kinds of higher education institutions were integrated into a single system of four-year university. Thus the number of universities suddenly increased in the 1950s. National universities, however, were renewed according to the designated policy that only one national university should be established in a prefecture. Then many pre-war national higher education institutions, technical colleges and normal schools, in the same prefecture were merged to be a single new national university. This policy made national universities be more prestigious than private universities because of its small number and also because of its comprehensiveness.

During the 1950s and 60s, the national universities enjoyed its privileged position regarding research and social contributions as well as teaching and training. People tended to prefer national universities when they advanced to higher education from the secondary schools. People regarded national universities as the important place for the students to get prestigious career after graduation. Thus, the admission of the national universities was highly selective and so called "Examination Hell," which meant that the entrance exam of national universities was so hard, was one of the most serious educational problems at that time.

National universities, as well as private universities, enjoyed strong university autonomy after the War II. This notion was lead by another notion of "academic freedom." Academic freedom is regarded as a very important notion for promoting original knowledge and teaching, and thus the Constitution of Japan, at its Article 23, guarantees this right to the people.

School Education Law requires every university to have faculty meeting that consists of professors and other academics to discuss about important matters for the university. This regulation is

so simple and the law does not define what kind of matters is “important.” Actually, in many universities, a faculty meeting deals with very wide range of matters, not only academic matters but also administrative and financial matters. It was quite usual that every decision making even managerial matters did not go ahead without approval of the faculty meeting. Faculties tended to regard faculty meetings as the place of final decision making and they thought even the presidents cannot make any decisions without approval of faculty meetings.

This may sounds very ridiculous but to some extent this power was quite real if we see the personnel matters of academics. The Special Law for Officials in charge of Education requires that recruitment, promotion and punishment of national and local public university professors must be executed after the approval of faculty meetings. This process is for job security for academics and also regarded as the guarantee of academic freedom in the national universities. However, this law has been seriously restricted the discretion of the president who should appoint academics.

The MEXT has tried to reduce the power of faculty meeting by clearly defining the role of it; it shall deal with academic matters, not managerial and administrative matters. The incorporation has changed the actual role of the faculty meeting and also academic senate. According to the Act of National University Corporation, the role of academic senate is restricted only to deal with academic matters and not managerial matters.

3. Incorporation of National Universities

The 1990s was witnessed the decade of university reform in Japan. Various kinds of reform, such as governance, management, funding, student services, and curriculum, intended to make the university more accountable to the students, the funding agencies, and the general public, in contradiction to the traditional notion of university or faculty autonomy. It has been regarded that expanded, broadened higher education and the progress of scientific research have made the Japanese university system no longer fit to the new requirements of the people. The university reform mode has continued since then into the early 2000s.

Finally, the most important reform for national universities was the administrative reorganization that converted the status of national universities to “national university corporations.” This scheme, conceptualized during the governmental reform planning of 1990s, aims at making national universities be more active in research and teaching, and also more accountable to the general public by separating their administration from the main body of the government. The General Law of Administrative Corporations enacted in 1999 states that administrative corporations will deal with public matters that need not be carried out by the government itself, but that are also not expected to be carried out by the private sector.

The concept of “incorporation” emerged in the 1990s as a tool for administrative and financial

reform of the government structure and activities. Japanese government had often implemented reforms by reducing the number of officials who worked for the government. The incorporation was something new because it did not directly aim at reducing the number of officials but it aimed at reducing the role of the government. By letting the corporations perform their work by their own responsibility, it is expected that the work will be done more effectively, i.e. more work with less resources. To enforce effectiveness, the government shall set up mid-term (usually five years) goals that the corporation must attain and the corporation set up mid-term plan of the work that should be approved by the government (see Chart 1).

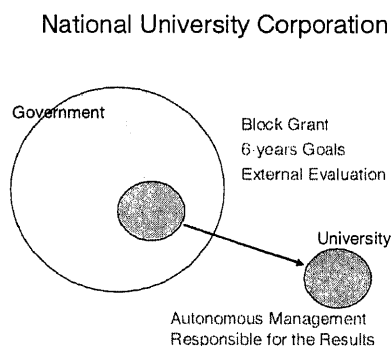


Chart 1 National University Corporation

Since the national university corporation is a kind of administrative corporation, national universities are expected to be more responsible to the general public. Some critics say that this scheme aims at reducing money that has to date been granted to universities. Although this may be true to some extent, the real aim is the clarification of responsibility of university activity. To do so, the government has introduced the following; (1) each university have its six-year action plan, such as improving the quality of teaching, performing more research activities, reducing the number of employees and so on, that must be approved by the Minister of Education; (2) the results of the six-year plan must be evaluated by the panel within the Ministry; (3) external administrators must be involved in university governance; (4) so called “faculty autonomy” will be replaced by presidential initiatives, which means that the decision-making is not controlled by faculty meetings but by the presidents; and (5) the government will provide funds that may vary depending on the results of the Ministerial Reviews.

Although the university corporation scheme is not the privatization of national universities, each institution compete with other institutions for the limited resources that is available for the national universities. University administration will change drastically from the past norm. This scheme has been implemented in April 2004.

By the incorporation, management of national university has been changed. Decision making is

done by the executive director of the institution, i.e., the president. The president and the board of trustees have gained initiatives. Even before the incorporation, the power of the president had been described that the president deals with university administration and direct all the people who work at the institution. But it had not been realized until the incorporation was implemented.

4. Merits and Demerits of Incorporation

By the Incorporation, the national universities have gained some merits. Among them, decision making process is enormous. Before the incorporation, the main actors of the decision making were academic senate, faculty meeting and various kinds of committee composed of faculties both institutional wide and in each school and department. Decision making by a single person, including the president, a dean, and a director, was tended to be avoided. This meant that national universities before incorporation were managed without strong leadership of the president because many managerial matters were fixed by the national regulations or they must be approved by the faculties.

After incorporation, however, strong leadership of the president became indispensable. The basic scheme of the national university corporation is that it should be managed by the president and several trustees who are appointed by the president. There are two important meeting, academic senate and managerial council, but their main role is discussion and making advices not decision making.

On the other hand, the incorporation has caused demerits on the national universities. Although the incorporation gave national universities more autonomy of decision making than before but this was not entire autonomy. The autonomy, if it were given fully, the universities would make their managerial decision at their own will and it should be market that would control their management finally. However, the national universities cannot do that because there are many restrictions, financially and administratively, by the government. For example, the amount of block-grant for universities in each year is based on some formula decided by the Government and each institution must follow the rule.

Each year the MEXT reduces the block grant by one percent for efficient use of the money. If the corporation would like to recover the reduction, they must apply the competitive resources such as COE (Center of Excellence Program), GP (Good Practice in Teaching) and so on. Getting money from industry is also encouraged strongly by the MEXT.

Evaluation system by the panel within the MEXT is a strong tool for controlling national universities. It may be necessary for guaranteeing accountability to the general public, but it may reduce the autonomy of the national universities. If an institution cannot attain the six-year mid-term goal or does different activities that are not listed up on the goal, the institution may be punished by the MEXT in terms of resource allocation or even in terms of executive order by the Minister. This makes very delicate relationship between national universities and the MEXT in terms of university

autonomy and accountability to the general public. Who should take direct responsibility to the general public; national universities or the MEXT?

5. The Future Perspective of National Universities

Japanese universities, as might have been the case in other countries, tended to be isolated from both the government and from society. However, along with the progress of the knowledge-based society and the changing higher education environment that I have discussed above, the distance between universities and the rest of society has diminished greatly. Borrowing from the idea of Burton Clark, the three kinds of university stakeholder play important roles in the university system as shown in Chart 2 (Clark, 1983, p.143). One is the university itself. The second is the market or the general public. Universities cannot disregard the emerging and changing needs of research and teaching expressed by the public, industry, parents, and students. The government represents the third stakeholder.

Government – University –Market Triangle

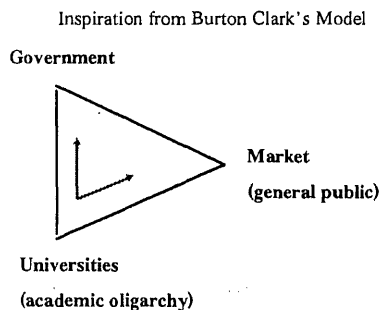


Chart 2 Government-University-Market Triangle

There has been a gradual shift in the balance among these three stakeholders. Private universities have become more aware of the market's role. National universities, in contrast, have grown to rely more on government, including resource allocation. The move to a more independent status is therefore causing anxiety for many university administrators and faculty. Whether the national university corporation system will be successful or not is entirely dependent on the ability to overcome this fear.

Looking at the environment surrounding universities, however, the role of universities has gained much more importance. Chart 3 shows growing or expanding role of higher education system in

Japan.

Higher Education System is still GROWING.

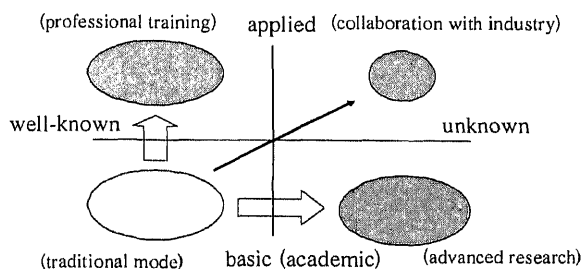


Chart 3 Higher Education System is still Growing

In this chart, knowledge is divided by two axes; well-known or unknown, and basic or applied. Since Japanese higher education system started late among major countries in the 19th century, the main role of universities was to introduce the most advanced research from overseas and to nourish talented students to be the elite for the state. This has made universities to deal with mainly the knowledge of well-known and basic mode. Japanese universities have been fit to this mode since their beginning and have not changed even in the massification of higher education and sophistication of science in the late 20th century.

However in reality, the research at universities has expanded greatly into the dimension of unknown and basic knowledge which means that Japanese leading universities compete with other leading universities around the world. In terms of teaching, universities have to respond to the massification and also advance of professional knowledge that leads universities to teach more vocational and professional contents, i.e., well-known and applied knowledge. Recent establishment of professional schools in law, business and management of technology is one example. Applied and unknown knowledge is the most recent matters that some universities must deal with. In this dimension, university-industry relationship catalyzed by the government is important. Life science and information technology are some example of this dimension.

Thus, the role of universities is expected to grow more in the knowledge based society in the 21st century. The national universities are expected to play leading role in this regard. Again, whether the incorporation of national universities will help this or not is the very critical matter for the future of national universities.

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